

# **Communicating with People who are Hard-of-Hearing**

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**Disability<sup>©</sup>  
Awareness  
Seminar**

## **Communicating with People who are Hard-of-Hearing**

1. Make sure you have the attention of the person who is hard-of-hearing before speaking. Waving a hand, or a light touch on the shoulder or arm, is an acceptable way to get attention.
2. Hearing loss does not equate with loss of intelligence, so you can ask the person what will make communication easier. Just because a person can hear your voice, it does not mean they can understand your words as hearing loss or even amplification be assistive listening devices such as hearing aids may cause distortion in the way sounds are

perceived.

3. Stand a normal distance from the person or get closer. Important consonants do not travel as far as the stronger vowels, yet carry more information. Getting closer also helps to put your voice above any noise. Do not try to converse from another room. And shouting doesn't help a person who is hard-of-hearing to hear.

4. Speak clearly and naturally with normal expression, at a normal pace. As creatures of habit we tend to talk at a certain rate and level that we have become comfortable with over the years. Sometimes these habits get in the way of good communication. If

you tend to speak quickly, slow down. People who are hard-of-hearing have less information in words to complete the picture — to fill in the gaps to ascertain meaning — much the same way we do when working a crossword puzzle. Slowing down the rate of speech gives more time to process, and generally improves the articulation of the speaker. Do not overly exaggerate or slow your speech too much at first. If the person has difficulty understanding, you have room to slow your speech more. It may also be of benefit if you use shorter, simpler sentences or break the sentences into smaller portions, and

check for understanding again.

5. Use open-ended questions to check for understanding.

6. Pronounce words clearly and naturally. It is usually not helpful to exaggerate words or to try to speak loudly. A raised voice generally will change the intended meaning. A loud voice may increase distortion without improving comprehension, giving the false impression that you are angry.

7. Be patient and take time to communicate. We may make a brief comment and if the person who is hard-of-hearing misses it we may dismiss as unimportant. Saying

“never mind” or “don’t worry about it,” causes the person with hearing loss to feel they are not important and leaves them bewildered and sometimes irritated.

8. Whenever possible, face the person you are speaking to and maintain eye contact. Do the same when an interpreter is present. The person who is hard-of-hearing often subconsciously relies on facial cues to aid in getting the message. As we normally read certain cues from facial expressions and the lips alone do not visibly produce many of the sounds of speech, this is not lip-reading as such.

9. Choose a quiet environment. Avoid

communicating where there is a lot of noise or visual activity such as in a crowded restaurant or echoey shopping centre. If there is a TV or radio in the room, consider turning it down. Move away from noise sources such as office machines and cooling fans or turn them off if you can.

Having a range hood or dishwasher on makes it more difficult to converse in the kitchen.

10. Did your mummy ever tell you not to talk with your mouth full? Playing with the end of a pen in your mouth, eating, chewing, smoking and the like will make our speech more difficult to understand.

11. Ask if the person who is hard-of-hearing has a “good side” (i.e. hears better from one ear rather than the other), and speak from that side.

12. Avoid filling out forms or reading while talking.

13. Do not cover your mouth when you are speaking. This includes covering your mouth with a hand, bushy moustache or beard. Speaking from behind a newspaper, book, hand, or other obstruction can reduce facial cues and blur the sound.

14. Use gesture, facial expression and body language to assist with communication.

15. Avoid standing in front of a light source when speaking. Try to make sure that your face is not in shadow and that the person who is hard-of-hearing is not faced with glare. A bright light behind you (from a window or desk lamp) will make it harder to see your face, so make sure the light is shining on your face, not behind you. Good lighting helps with “speech reading”. Allow the person with hearing loss to choose their seating first. Most people know how the environment will help or interfere with communication.

16. If what you have said is not heard or understood repeat the statement,

then re–phrase if the person is unable to hear the words spoken. If it is difficult for the person who is hard-of-hearing to understand you, try another way of saying the same thing. Some words are more difficult to understand than others due to phonemic content.

17. Maximise environmental visual cues. Good signage, directions, handouts, notes and use of captions on videos can all help to convey the message.

18. Give the person who is hard-of-hearing some announcement or clue as to the subject of the conversation or explicitly state the topic of

discussion as you begin. When you change the topic, make sure the listener is aware of the new topic. Either avoid abrupt changes in subject matter or try not to change the subject.

19. Reinforce letters and numbers. ‘V’ as in ‘Victor’ or ‘d’ as in ‘dog’ can prevent confusion. Finger-spelling (if you both know it) or pointing can be useful.

20. Be aware of fatigue. People who are hard-of-hearing, deaf or deaf/blind must work harder to communicate and this can be extremely tiring. Persons who are hard-of-hearing will understand less

if they are tired or unwell.

21. Keep a note pad handy. Try writing down a couple words or a phrase to clarify if communication is difficult. Sometimes miming a gesture will get your point across.

22. In a group setting, make sure only one person at a time is talking, and that person needs to have the attention of the person with the hearing loss. Don't assume that a person who is hard-of-hearing is able to understand casual conversation taking place in the room.

23. In a prayer circle either have the person who is hard-of-hearing pray

first or have the person next to them gently touch them on the hand when it is their turn to pray. Be sure to say a hearty “Amen” when you are finished so that the person who is hard-of-hearing knows the praying is finished.

24. Good Communication takes practice, so ask the person who is hard-of-hearing to remind you when you slip up. The person who is hard-of-hearing has to practice too, actively listening, watching, and attending to a person who has gotten their attention and wishes to talk with them.

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